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# Commercial or public service actors? Controversies in the nature of Russia's regional mass media

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## ABSTRACT

Traditionally, regional mass media has been the least-studied component of the Russian media system; however, beginning from the 2000s, transformations in the nation's political and economic spheres have influenced the position of local media. This paper provides a deeper investigation of the processes and patterns underlying the development of regional mass media in modern Russia. The research is grounded on an analytical review of secondary sources, which is supported by 14 in-depth interviews with media professionals from 5 regions in Russia. The results reveal that Russia's regional media outlets operate both as commercial actors and public service actors. This duality is rooted in several multidirectional and controversial changes in the nation's economic and political systems, as well as in a journalist culture which causes media outlets to have a vague understanding of their places and functions in society.

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## Introduction

Compared to big media outlets, regional and local media are not trendy topics, especially in academic literature. Local media typically occupies a weaker position in a country's media system due to its many challenges, such as lower quality of journalism, poor economic conditions and lack of technological development (Currah, 2009; Nielsen, 2015). However, scholars argue that local media and journalism deserve more attention. As Kleis Nielsen explained, local journalism 'provides information about local public affairs, it holds local elites at least somewhat accountable, it provides a forum for discussion, and ties communities together' (Nielsen, 2015, p. 1). However, two questions emerge: How relevant is this statement to local journalism in non-Western media systems such as Russia's? What are the actual roles of regional mass media in modern Russia?

Existing research on Russia's regional media primarily cover the first 1.5 decades of the post-Soviet period (1990s–mid-2000s). This period created new political and economic conditions which catalysed fundamental changes in the country's media system, including

the financing models of media outlets, the professional norms and values of journalists, and state–media relations.<sup>1</sup> Regional media also underwent major transformations during this time. The short period of media independence at the beginning, which granted media outlets with the power to act as a ‘fourth branch of government’ (1990–1992), was replaced by a period of harsh economic conditions in which regional media relied on barter deals for advertising space or electoral cash to keep their outlets afloat (Roudakova, 2017). Starting from the mid-1990s, new local elites, represented by ‘cross-institutional groups’,<sup>2</sup> sought to establish control over regional media outlets which were perceived as key resources in the struggle for power. Informational wars between these groups are considered to have instrumentalized Russia’s regional media and the ‘selling out’ of their independence (Koltsova, 2006; Roudakova, 2009). Beginning in the 2000s, these intra-elite struggles were replaced by the centralization of political control via the Kremlin’s direct appointment of regional governors.<sup>3</sup> Cross-institutional groups, which lost their political ambitions, no longer seemed to need media outlets.

The latest period in the history of Russia’s regional media is characterized by clientelist relations with regional authorities (Lowrey & Erzikova, 2010) and new financing sources, such as state informational contracts (Dovbysh & Gudova, 2016). This period is much less studied than previous ones; however, one can suggest that recent changes in the political system, financing models and professional culture of regional journalists led to a transformation of the very nature of regional media outlets. The coexistence of clientelist relations with regional authorities, commercial goals to maximize profitability, professional cynicism, and the intention to provide public-oriented content placed regional media in a controversial position.

The present article investigates recent transformations in Russia’s regional mass media starting from the 2000s and ending in 2018, as well as the influence these changes had on the positions and roles of media outlets in regions. An analysis of the political, economic and cultural factors which shaped the current position of regional mass media is supported by 14 in-depth interviews with media professionals in 5 regions of Russia, revealing the controversial nature of media which combines market- and public-oriented logic.

Due to the absence of public service broadcasting in the country, the idea of public service is not often applied to Russian media (Vartanova, 2012). Nevertheless, particularly for local media, the notion of public service is seen as opposite to the commercial logic of mass media.<sup>4</sup> In analysing Russia’s regional media, I do not address public service broadcasting (i.e. a practical embodiment of public service) but a more general idea of public interest<sup>5</sup> that public-oriented media tends to pursue. Public interest is not synonymous with the interests of the audience; rather, it implies a responsibility to support the norms, ethics and values of a society through informational diversity and representation of various social groups and communities, including those which are small and underprivileged (McQuail, 2010; Rozanova, 2007). In this sense, I understand public service as the ability to create a ‘communicational condition of democracy characterized by [the] informed and responsible engagement of citizens in public debates under conditions of separation and [the] balance of power’ (Rozanova, 2007, p. 142).

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. The next section describes the current state of affairs of Russia’s regional mass media. Following this, I analyse the most influential changes which affect the current nature of this media. My analysis of secondary sources is supported by interview data collected from local media professionals. I

then discuss the controversial nature of regional mass media in modern Russia. The article closes with several conclusions.

## Russia's regional media system

How is regional media defined? Are there any differences between regional and local media? Western authors often use 'regional' and 'local' media interchangeably, suggesting that they are generic terms, opposed to national media (Cheng, 2005; Franklin & Murphy, 2005). At the same time, the local scale is quite flexible and may refer to 'a neighbourhood, town, county, metropolitan area, or region' (Cheng, 2005, p. 143). In Russian-language studies, however, the term *regionalnie SMI* ('regional mass media') is more common, referring to non-national media which operates within the boundaries of a particular region.<sup>6</sup> Another term, *lokalnie SMI* ('local media'), usually describes the media of smaller territories, such as districts or cities; however, this term is much rarer in discussions of Russian media.<sup>7</sup>

Besides this place-oriented approach to local media, there is a people-oriented approach. In this approach, some groups of people can be excluded from the target audience of local news outlets, despite living in the same geographical area (Poindexter, Smith, & Heider, 2003). In the present article, I rely on the place-oriented approach and thus define regional mass media as media which operates at the regional level of Russia's media system, meaning that it is based in one of Russia's 85 regions, focuses on regional news agendas, and consumed mainly by the residents of these regions.<sup>8</sup> Media outlets with smaller than regional coverage, if not separately specified, are also included in this category. I use the terms 'local journalists' and 'local media professionals' to refer to those who work in local mass media.

According to Roskomnadzor,<sup>9</sup> there were 80,134 registered media outlets in Russia in 2017 (*Mass media in Russia in, 2017, 2018*), around 31,000 of which were registered in a particular region;<sup>10</sup> however, these figures only consider registration status, not whether they are active. Therefore, there is no reliable data on the number of regional newspapers, radio stations and other types of mass media that are currently in operation.

Regional media is an important source of information for the Russian public. According to surveys conducted in 2017, 83% of Russians get information<sup>11</sup> from regional TV (35% = 'often', 48% = 'seldom'), 70% from regional newspapers (24% = 'often', 46% = 'seldom'), 49% from regional radio (16% = 'often', 33% = 'seldom') (*WCIOM [All-Russian Public Opinion Research Center], 2017*). The popularity of regional media increases depending on the region's remoteness from Moscow: only 33% of Russians living in the Central Federal District watch regional TV regularly, but this figure increases to 53% in the Far Federal District (*Strana Online', 2017*). Nevertheless, consumption of regional media is much lower than that of national media. Mediascope<sup>12</sup> reported a decrease in viewership from 4.1% in 2014 to 3.7% in 2015, then to 3.4% in 2016 (*Television in Russia in, 2016, 2017*). For national TV channels such as Perviy Kanal ('First Channel') or Rossiya 1 ('Russia 1'), typical viewership ranges between 12.1–13.2% (*Mediascope spotted the most popular Russian TV channel, 2018*). However, the level of trust in Russia's local media is still high: 65% of Russians trust local TV, 44% trust local press and 36% trust local radio (TV, Internet, newspapers, radio: Trust but check, 2016). According to Foundation Mediastandart (<http://www.msindex.ru/>, 2017), trust in local mass media is even higher than trust in national mass media. These statistics demonstrate that even though regional mass media is less

visible than its national counterpart and are not the first choice of the Russian public, it is still considered an important and reliable source of information.

Regional media outlets represent a very heterogeneous group. As noted in previous research, the locality of media is quite flexible (Cheng, 2005). Within Russia's regional media, I have observed three levels of locality:

- (1) Mass media with all-region coverage. Every region in Russia has at least one all-region TV channel (a branch of VGTRK [The Russian Television and Radio Broadcasting Company]), but usually there are another 1–2 TV channels, 1–2 radio channels and several newspapers all distributed across the region.
- (2) Mass media with district (*rayon*)<sup>13</sup> coverage. District media typically includes newspapers and online media, but some districts also have audio–visual media (e.g. TV and radio).
- (3) Media that covers cities (urban media) and smaller settlements. Urban media outlets are more commonly based in regional capitals and other big cities, due to the greater availability of resources in these areas.

Regional media can also be categorized according to the type of owner or founder. This level of differentiation is important because it influences the targets, goals, missions and editorial policies of media outlets. The following types of owners have been observed: federal authorities, regional authorities, municipal authorities and private owners (i.e. companies and/or individuals). Federal authorities are comprised mainly of the regional branches of the VGTRK. Regional authorities own different media assets, from TV channels to online media; in mid-2000s, through the creation of 'governor's TV channels', the share of regional governments in regional media capital increased in many regions (Vyrkovskiy & Makeenko, 2014). Private owners are very diverse, ranging from big industrial groups headquartered in Moscow (e.g. the regional network of Hearst Shkulev Digital) to local individuals and businesses. These owners may be based in the same region or in another region.

Recent research has demonstrated that the organizational forms of regional media outlets do not have much of an effect on their operation (Dovbysh & Gudova, 2016). Mass media operating in the form of a joint stock company may be owned by regional authorities and receive significant financial support from local budgets.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, state-owned media outlets can act as commercial companies and rely on market sources of income. Therefore, this reveals that financing models are another important feature of Russia's regional media (Vyrkovskiy & Makeenko, 2014). Three main financing models have been identified in the literature, according to their level of profitability (i.e. from extremely low or negative profitability to high [10–13%] profitability) and shares of state versus commercial sources of income.

These classifications demonstrate a predicament of Russia's regional media, in which the ownership structure does not influence the outlets' financing models and profitability, nor does it reflect the company's stability in the market. This predicament was brought about by changes in the regional media system occurring in the 2000s.

### ***Recent changes in Russia's regional media system***

Previous research had a strong focus on analysing media–political relations as the main explanatory factor which shaped the regional media landscape of Russia. However,

political influence always goes hand-in-hand with economic factors (Erzikova & Lowrey, 2014, 2017). The professional culture of local journalists is considered another important element of Russia's regional media (Pasti & Pietiläinen, 2008; Roudakova, 2017). In the present research, I view all three elements (i.e. politics, economics and professional culture) as tightly intertwined, thus imbuing current transformations in regional media with a multicausal nature. Moreover, not only visible factors (i.e. media-political relations) but also implicit factors (i.e. culture) may have a significant impact.

To study these multicausal transformations, I selected a six-area analytical framework developed by Toepfl (2013), who earlier used it to compare media changes in Russia and the Czech Republic. The framework has the following structure. The first three areas (i.e. journalist culture, political system and economic system) form the central, inter-related elements which shape the Russian media system. Together with the last three areas (i.e. media-related beliefs among citizens, socio-economic development and other external factors), the framework highlights an epistemological premise: complex processes at the macro level, such as changes in the media system, are considered a result of various interactions between factors at the lower levels (Toepfl, 2013).

In the following subsections, I discuss how I adjusted this framework to suit the purposes of the present research. I analyse the dimensions of Russia's regional media development and the three central, inter-related areas. Descriptions of the last three areas are embedded within the discussions of the corresponding central areas: socio-economic development and external factors in the section on economic system, and citizen's media-related beliefs in the section on journalist culture.

### *Economic system*

Today, Russia's regional media outlets face harsh economic conditions and rely on state financing, both industry and state representatives argue (*Council Under the President*, 2016; Kasyutin, 2011a, 2011b). At least two of the reasons behind this dependency can be explained by economic factors.

First, the majority of regional advertising markets are still unable to provide enough financing for all the media outlets in a region. The size of an advertising market is strongly correlated with the country's GDP (Gross Domestic Product) (Aris & Bughin, 2005). Total advertising expenditures and advertising expenditures per capita are still much lower in post-Soviet countries than in Western Europe and the USA.<sup>15</sup> It is also important to note the socio-economic inequalities that exist between Russia's regions, which lead to disproportions within the regional media system. For instance, the highest region's GDP rate (in Moscow) is 330 times greater than the lowest one (in Altai Republic). Regional media also differs according to characteristics dependent on socio-economic development (e.g. number of media outlets, capacities of advertising markets, and audience characteristics). The other important difference is that, as a rule, the majority of a region's advertising budget is concentrated in the capital city of that region.

Second, the disproportions between national and regional advertising markets cause a significant share of the regional advertising to be distributed by a central media seller in Moscow, not in a regional distributor.<sup>16</sup> This happens when local advertisers buy advertising facilities not only in local media outlets but also in national media outlets (e.g. when national TV channels purchase geo-targeted advertising spots). National media outlets sell their advertising facilities from a single media seller, Region Media, located in Moscow.

Since TV advertising is the most expensive, approximately 50% of the available financing flows away from local media outlets to media corporations with national broadcasting capabilities.

Lack of commercial financing make alternative sources of income more desirable for local media outlets; among these, state financing is perhaps the easiest to obtain. [Table 1](#) demonstrates the distribution of financing sources between the national and regional levels of the Russian media system in 2016.<sup>17</sup> State financing of national mass media includes support for state-owned media companies with all-region coverage, such as VGTRK, a TV network Russia Today and information agency Rossiya Segodnya (Bryzgalova, 2015). The main form of this type of financing is direct subsidies. Regarding regional media, state financing supports local media outlets and comes in different forms, the most popular of which are state informational contracts and direct target subsidies.

A comparison between the sizes of state and commercial financing demonstrates that the majority of income sources are concentrated at the national level (i.e. in Moscow). Compared to regional media outlets, national media outlets are much more likely to profit from advertising. A recent study revealed new changes in advertising at the national level and higher competition for advertising resources due to international sanctions (Kiriya, 2017). Financing sources are distributed more evenly at the regional level; that is, state support and advertising income are almost equal (see [Table 1](#)).

It is important to note that due to the historical, religious and ethnic backgrounds of its residents, Russia's regions are characterized by their diverse cultural identities (Gelman & Hopf, 2003). These identities influence how relations between regional authorities and mass media are structured.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, each region may have differing proportions of state support and advertising income.

In summary, the economic conditions of regional mass media are shaped by two factors:

- (1) Advertising budgets are disproportionally distributed between Moscow and the other regions. This inequality causes regional media outlets to become more dependent on alternative forms of financial support.
- (2) State financing plays a key role in Russia's regional media system, since the proportion of state financing is almost equal to that of advertising expenditures.

### **Political system**

Political systems can be described as systems of interrelated activities that influence the way in which authoritative decisions are formulated and executed for a society (Easton,

**Table 1.** Financing sources at the national and regional levels of the Russian media system in 2016.

Financing sources	Russian mass media	
	National level (media outlets with national coverage), bln rubles	Regional level (regional and local media outlets), bln rubles
State financing (e.g. direct and indirect subsidies, state informational contracts)	80.2	43.2
Advertising	360	45

Sources: AKAR (Association of Communication Agencies of Russia); ARPP (Regional Press Distributors Association).



1957). However, in the present paper, I only discuss changes in the Russian political system that concern regional media. The most influential transformation in regional media policies occurred in the mid-2000s, when two crucial Federal laws were repealed.

The first of these laws<sup>19</sup> provided special economic conditions for mass media. Media outlets were not subject to value-added tax (VAT) and customs duties for operations related to the production and distribution of media products. Also, media outlets enjoyed reduced fees for using postal services, sending a telegraph and talking on a telephone, as well as lower-than-market rental rates.

The second law<sup>20</sup> aimed to support local press media,<sup>21</sup> which was facing the poorest economic conditions of its history due to disproportions in advertising expenditures. According to this law, local newspapers would be entitled to financial support from the federal budget for production and development.

However, both of these laws were repealed in August 2004, when law No 121 was introduced and established 'principles of constitutional state with a socially-oriented market economy' (Richter, 2006). This signals an important shift in Russian media policy: regional mass media outlets are no longer seen by federal authorities as organizations requiring special economic regimes and institutional protectionism; on the contrary, they are now considered market actors which, according to neoliberal logic, produce market goods rather than public goods. After these changes in media policy, Russia became the only country (among large European countries) that provided neither a privileged economic regime for mass media nor an institute of public-service media (Richter, 2006).

Public speeches by officials support the market-oriented view towards regional mass media. For example, Alexey Volin, the Deputy Minister of Telecom and Mass Communication, has repeatedly argued for the importance of generating profit rather than relying on state support (Volin: *It is necessary*, 2016).

### *Journalist culture*

Toepfl (2013) define journalist culture as 'the professional norms and wider political and social beliefs according to which the journalists of a country process information and interpret social reality' (p. 244). Considering the previous media regimes of Russia, the current professional norms and political beliefs of Russian journalists working for local media outlets should be carefully analysed (Pasti & Pietiläinen, 2008; Roudakova, 2017).

In the Soviet Union, journalists perceived themselves to be more than just disseminators of information. Scholars have described them as creative, independent agents in the political and social contexts of Russia (Wu, Weaver, & Johnson, 1996) or as 'co-participants in the ethico-political enterprise of governing that [which] was Soviet socialism' (Roudakova, 2009, p. 414). Their role thus included establishing political agendas and developing the interests of the public. Relations with readers and viewers helped form the image of Russian mass media as being accountable to its citizens and 'sustain journalism's legitimacy as "the most humane" institution of Soviet power' (Roudakova, 2017, p. 51).

Significant changes in values occurred among Russian journalists during the first half of the 1990s. Due to political situation, journalists became indistinguishable from politicians (Pasti & Pietiläinen, 2008) and were treated as 'weapon[s] to gain political capital' (Koltsova, 2006). Roudakova (2009) described this period as the 'privatization' and fragmentation of journalism, addressing the collapse of trust in journalism among readers, listeners and viewers.

Beginning from the 2000s, relations between the state and local media outlets were often described as clientelist,<sup>22</sup> or close to it (Lowrey & Erzikova, 2010). Pasti and Pietiläinen (2008) argued that the oppositional role (i.e. criticizing the authorities) of local journalism has decreased, while ‘a paternalistic relationship to the audience has retained its position’ (p. 128). Erzikova and Lowrey (2014) noticed that, at the regional level, this paternalistic model is ‘refracted’ in a strange manner. Local authorities tend to empower regional journalists by bolstering the myth that they are helping underprivileged citizens. This position is beneficial for local officials who divert the media from scrutinizing the government too closely (Erzikova & Lowrey, 2014). Journalists, in turn, interpret their collaboration with the government as a form of ‘social responsibility – an important aspect of legitimacy – rationalizing it as a chance to help the disadvantaged’ (Erzikova & Lowrey, 2014, p. 48). Operating under the clientelist framework, local journalists view public service duty and social responsibility as crucial to their public and professional legitimacy (Erzikova & Lowrey, 2014).

This paternalistic support of regional journalists resulted in the emergence of state informational contracts at the beginning of the 2000s. These contracts are typically made between regional authorities and media outlets to solicit a pre-defined service, such as media coverage of a particular topic or production of a particular media product (e.g. a TV series). Such contracts fulfill different purposes, one of which is financing local media coverage of ‘socially significant’ information (Ademukova, Dovbysh, Kiriya, & Chumakova, 2017).

It is important to note that while this period damaged the relations between journalists and their patrons, the level of public trust in Russian regional media is still high: 65% of Russians trust regional and local TV, 44% trust regional and local press, and 36% trust regional and local radio (WCIOM, 2016).

The combination of being oriented towards public service and having clientelist relations with authorities creates a bizarre situation. On the one hand, journalists must perform their professional duties and reinforce their public legitimacy; on the other hand, they do not want to spoil their relations with their patrons. As a result, journalists ‘pursue ceremonial, skin-deep scrutiny of the officials; they engage in artificial forum “roundtables” with officials; and they emphasize the publication of many brief stories to connote progressiveness’ (Lowrey & Erzikova, 2010, p. 275).

### ***The controversial nature of Russia’s regional mass media from the perspective of local media professionals***

In the previous sections, I described how transformations in three interrelated areas have affected Russia’s regional mass media. However, it may be more important to explore how these changes have shaped local media professionals’ understanding of the nature of regional mass media. To achieve this, I conducted 14 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with both journalists and managers working in media outlets in five Russian regions, including the Volga, Siberia, Ural and Far Eastern Federal Districts (see Table 2).

Each interview lasted 40–120 min, with an average length of 70 min, and were all conducted in 2016 and 2017. The interview guide included three blocks of questions. The first block was concerned with the media outlet’s information policies and censorship practices, as well as its mission and functions. The second block investigated the media

**Table 2.** Respondent information.

Interview #	Region	Position, gender	Media outlet (type, ownership structure)
1	Republic, Volga Federal District	Chief editor, male	Online media. Part of a media holding company and registered as private. The main shareholders are regional authorities.
2	Republic, Volga Federal District	General producer, male	Two TV channels (city and regional). The first one is a private company. The second one is jointly owned by a private company and a holding company, and is registered as private. The main shareholders are regional authorities.
3	Republic, Volga Federal District	Chief editor, male	Online media. Private company.
4	Republic, Volga Federal District	Chief editor, female	District newspaper and TV channel. Part of a media holding company and registered as a JSC. The main shareholders are regional authorities.
5	Region (Oblast), Siberia Federal District	Director, male; general producer, female	Regional TV channel. Private company. Regional authorities are among its shareholders.
6	Region (Oblast), Volga Federal District	Chief editor, male	Regional newspaper. Private company.
7	Region (Oblast), Volga Federal District	Chief editor, male	Regional TV channel. Private company.
8	Region (Oblast), Volga Federal District	Independent journalist, male	The respondent has contributed to several regional newspapers.
9	Republic, Far Eastern Federal District	General director, male	Online media. Private company.
10	Republic, Far Eastern Federal District	Commercial director, female	Private media holding company. Regional authorities are among its shareholders.
11	Region (Oblast), Ural Federal District	Chief editor, male	Information agency owned by regional authorities.
12	Region (Oblast), Ural Federal District	General director, male	Private media holding company.
13	Republic, Volga Federal District	Dean of Journalism Faculty, male	The respondent is a former deputy general director of a media holding company, which is registered as private. The main shareholders are regional authorities.
14	Republic, Volga Federal District	Deputy general director, female	Media holding company, registered as private. The main shareholders are regional authorities.

outlet's financing sources and economic model. The third block included questions on state informational contracts and the social responsibility of media.

All the respondents, regardless of ownership structure and financing sources, stressed the importance of economic expediency, using such words as 'profit', 'to earn' and 'business' to describe their activities. The necessity of mass media or its components is defined by the commercial performance of media outlets:

We kept the programmes that let us earn. Our supervisors (parent company – O.D.) clearly articulated: everything that is not profitable must be closed. (Interview 4)

Non-market funding, such as state informational contracts, is also described using a 'business' narrative. The respondents viewed their budgetary funds as commercial sources of income, since they received the funds as payment for a particular service. One respondent described changes in the symbolic value of their budgetary funds:

We don't have 'pure' budgetary funds; we don't get them for nothing, by default ... For salaries ... or for utility bills ... < ... >. We compete for state contracts, for instance, for one-year contracts in which a certain number of programmes are ordered. [...] Furthermore, when one receives a contract, the funds are not considered budgetary anymore; it is payment for a service—the service was ordered and you must provide it. (Interview 5)

For state-owned media, 'business' goals can co-exist with the role of mouthpiece for regional authorities. As mentioned by an owner of a commercial media holding which works closely with regional authorities:

We are a joint-stock company [JSC], and as a JSC we must be profitable [... We are a] state-owned mass media [outlet] that was formed to speak in plain language about state policies, government activities [and] the governor's activities'. (Interview 10)

This bizarre combination of roles is the result of conflicting changes in the regional media system. The national media policy of Russia follows a market-oriented logic, while regional authorities aim to control the regional media landscape via financial instruments or participation in media capital.

Another narrative visible in the interviews is what I call 'public service'. In this narrative, the respondents highlighted their duties to serve the people and be closer to their readers or viewers:

[We cover] any complaints, injustices ... We are trying to be on the side of ordinary people, to restore justice [and] to support [them]. (Interview 6)

The idea of being closer to readers suggests that the respondents viewed media outlets as helpers and problem-solvers for ordinary people. Another respondent reported: 'We are open. Many [people] come here [as their] last hope, when nobody else [could] help' (Interview 4). This concept is close to one of the roles of journalism in the Soviet period: 'doctors' who treated the 'external illnesses' of social issues without identifying the true causes (Roudakova, 2009). Similar to its role in the Soviet period, journalism is limited to the solving of everyday problems; that is, mass media can interfere with social issues, such as housing and communal services, but it cannot influence political processes:

Journalists were 'the fourth power' about 30 years ago, during the period of Perestroika. But we still influence public opinions: we can stop some projects, we can force [the government] to reconsider the cancellation of dozen of routes [of public transport—O.D.]. (Interview 6)

What is most interesting is how these two narratives co-exist within and constitute the current role of regional mass media. The commercial narrative seems to have helped the respondents legitimize the state financing model. Viewing themselves as commercial actors, media outlets pursue profitability as their main goal, which requires the maximization of audience size. Such a goal does not imply any social or public-oriented outputs; thus, external financing is needed to implement the public-service functions of media (e.g. diversity of information, representation of various social groups and communities, and unprofitable yet socially significant topics). State informational contracts offered a solution to eliminate the 'market failure' of neglecting socially significant information.

One respondent explained that if a commercial TV channel avoided a certain topic that was not commercially attractive or covered it only briefly, financing from state informational contracts would allow a deeper exploration of the topic:

This is an issue of shifting emphases and palettes. As I already said, let's consider TV channel X (name of the TV channel – O.D.)—this is a purely commercial channel. And let's consider TV channel Y (name of another TV channel – O.D.), where we actually have state informational contracts. This is an issue of, first, shifting emphases and priorities, and, second, this is an issue of, let's say, depths of investigation on certain topics. I mean, if in the case of a commercial TV channel we focus more on ratings, then in the case of a state contract, we can do more ... (Interview 2)

However, the co-existence of these two narratives has also muddled the role of regional mass media. The respondents could not define whether they were market actors or public servants,<sup>23</sup> citing profitability and the necessity of earning money while, at the same time, stressing the importance of serving public interests. This controversial nature of regional media outlets is reflected in the following quote, which proposes the idea of serving all stakeholders:

We are balancing the need to please our customers, who pay us good money, to please our founder [regional authorities – O.D.] and [serve] a third client, our readers. We need to please them as well. (Interview 10)

## Discussion

An analysis of these political, economic and cultural factors reveals the multicausal nature of transformations in Russia's regional media system. Poor regional advertising markets, along with their subordination to national advertising markets, creates a reliance on state financial support. State financing has historically been rooted in Russia's regional media system, and it is a financing model that is anticipated and confirmed by all stakeholders.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, state financing is often seen as a better and easier source of income than advertising revenues. As Ershov (2012) argued, 'it is easier to deal with one "administrator of credits" in the backrooms of power than to learn sales techniques, create a network of advertising agents and compete for advertisers every day' (p. 178).

Simultaneously, changes in media policy implemented by federal authorities seek to steer regional media towards commercialization and market-oriented logic. However, neither during the Soviet period nor the post-Soviet period did regional media outlets become financially independent or act purely on commercial logic.<sup>25</sup> Federal media policy conflicts with the intentions of regional authorities who still want to control media via quasi-economic tools (state informational contracts). As a result, while striving to be more commercial, regional media is actually becoming more dependent on state financing.

One form of state financing, called 'state informational contracts', appeared at the beginning of the 2000s in response to this conflict and has since become widespread in most Russian regions. On the surface, state informational contracts are just another way to distribute local budgetary funds among media outlets (i.e. a way of controlling local media through economic leverage); however, their contractual format imitates market relations, establishing local authorities as 'clients' and regional media outlets as 'suppliers' of a certain service.

The unique journalist culture of Russia has also had great influence on its regional media. During the Soviet period, the central role of journalism was to prioritize citizen-oriented reporting and actively participate in redressing injustice (with or without

publishing an article). The post-Soviet period dramatically changed the image of local journalists, starting from 'the fourth estate', moving to 'the second oldest profession', then settling on 'cynic friends of power' (Roudakova, 2017). Today, as they are routinely excluded from any political communication, regional journalists seek 'safe ground' of their professional occupation by helping underprivileged citizens (Lowrey & Erzikova, 2010).

It is quite difficult to categorize these aspirations as pure evidence of the social responsibility of journalism or the public-service function of media. However, the present research shows that the new economic realities of regional media bring fresh meaning to the citizen-oriented approach, making it more salient for local media professionals. Since the main goal of regional media outlets is to achieve profitability, features such as diversity of information, representation of various groups and communities, and treating readers or viewers as citizens rather than an audience become less attainable. However, regional media outlets still perceive themselves as important social institutes for their local communities, capable of providing help and valuable information to ordinary people. In this sense, I address the dichotomy of media outlets as market actors and as public servants. The current trend in regional media towards commercialization poses a question regarding how the public responsibilities of regional media outlets can be fulfilled in the new media regime.

The present research also demonstrates that state informational contracts, besides being a tool of control, play a second role: state support of public-oriented content. This is why a significant share of these contracts cover socially significant topics (Dovbysh & Gudova, 2016). In the absence of an institutionalized public-service model, state authorities follow a paternalistic model based on the 'duty to protect and guide' (Williams, 1976). This means that supervisors or controllers of mass media aim at not only to maximizing their political power but also making something good and useful to society.

Today's regional media system has been shaped by the mismatch between regional and federal policies as well as by the peculiar journalist culture of Russia. The market-oriented logic implanted by federal authorities is accompanied by the public-oriented logic rooted in local journalist culture. These two logics are controversial when followed together, as commercial media tends to maximize revenue while public-service media focuses on service to society. Therefore, regional media outlets fluctuate between two logics, the boundaries of which are blurred. The interview responses reported in this paper demonstrate that local media professionals (both journalists and managers) cannot clearly define their roles; instead, they cite their commercial goals and insist on the importance of being profitable, although they strongly believe in public duty. They are trying to strike a balance between these controversial goals while serving all their 'beneficiaries'. This situation creates quite a legitimate and stable model of Russia's regional media system. The lack of public-oriented media content is explained by the commercial goals of regional media outlets; at the same time, the respondents' aspirations to be helpful to the public suggests the inevitability of state informational contracts (and other state financing models) that will fix the current 'market failure' (i.e. the underrepresentation of socially significant information).

## Conclusion

Through the lens of local media professionals, this paper explored how transformations in Russia's political, economic and cultural spheres have formed a controversial yet stable model of the nation's regional media. Russia's contemporary media system is far from what is considered a normative commercial media model (Toepfl, 2013; Vartanova, 2012), and it is also radically different from the model of the Soviet period (Becker, 2014); nevertheless, the regional media landscape of today includes elements from both these regimes. The present research demonstrates what happens when Western concepts of commercial media collide with the deeply embedded norms and practices of local journalism in Russia, such as its roots in state interference and its strong public-oriented and socially responsible traditions.

Due to the limited number of interviews conducted over the course of this research, I neither insist that this paper offers a comprehensive explanation of the regional media landscape in Russia, nor do I deny the existence of regional media outlets which have a different understanding of their positions and roles in Russian society. To better understand the interrelations between macro changes (e.g. political, economic, cultural and technological) and their influence on how local media outlets reconsider their professional norms and values, further research is required.

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## Notes

1. Earlier research on Russia's new media system aimed to assess whether Western (i.e. American and European) media systems are relevant to the case of Russia (De Smaele, 1999). De Smaele concluded that some principles of Western media systems were adopted by the Russian media system; however, several political, economic and cultural peculiarities make the development of Russian media quite different, such that one can discuss a distinctly 'Russian' system. Later research called this system 'neo-Authoritarian' (Becker, 2004, 2014), 'neo-Soviet' (Oates, 2007) and 'state-commercialized' (Vartanova, 2012).
2. Koltsova (2006) explained 'cross-institutional groups' as groups of financiers, businesspeople, state agents and security representatives acting in a private capacity and pooling together their resources to jointly struggle for and wield power. Kiriya (2012) called them 'large industrial groups'.
3. The Russian Duma did away with direct gubernatorial elections in 2004.
4. In the public service model, media is non-profit and non-commercial (commercial principles are not applicable as the primary means to determine the content), aims to maximize the capability set of broadcasting users and cannot be evaluated only in terms of what audience buy and enjoy (Garnham, 1999; McChesney, 1999).
5. McQuail (2010) mentioned six characteristics of content to fulfill public interest: diversity of information, opinion and culture; supportive of public order and the law; high quality of information and culture; supportive of the democratic political system (public sphere), respectful of international obligations and human rights; avoiding harm to society and individuals.
6. As of 2018, the Russian Federation includes 85 federal subjects with 6 types: republic, region (krai), region (oblast), city with federal status, autonomous region (oblast) and autonomous



region (okrug). Each type differs in legal status. In the present article, I call all federal subjects of Russia 'regions', since their legal statuses are not relevant to this research.

7. Even authors in English-language texts, when writing about Russian media, use the term 'regional' rather than 'local' (see Erzikova & Lowrey, 2014; Lowrey & Erzikova, 2010; Pasti & Pietiläinen, 2008).
8. It is important to note that digital technologies and the Internet have collapsed the geographic boundaries of local media. Today, many local news outlets have adopted digital forms of media and can be assessed from anywhere with an Internet connection. Nevertheless, empirical data demonstrates that local media (both historically and currently) continue to report on local affairs and is oriented towards local citizens and advertisers.
9. 'Roskomnadzor' is an abbreviation for the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media.
10. A media outlet registered in any Russian region can operate on the national level. However, as a rule, registration within a region indicates regional distribution. Most outlets providing national mass media are registered in Moscow.
11. These surveys collected general information and did not specify, for example, local or national issues.
12. Mediascope is the main company that has been certified to measure and report on statistics in Russian media. It was formerly known as TNS Gallup Media Russia.
13. In Russia, districts (*rayon*) include several towns and villages.
14. JSC 'Tatmedia' in Tatarstan is the perhaps the best example of this type of media outlet.
15. For instance, the US advertising market was estimated at \$206 bln in 2016 (eMarketer, 2017), \$26.91 bln in Germany, \$24.87 bln in the UK (*Online Marketing Trends*, 2017), \$8.89 bln in Russia (eMarketer, 2015). Russia's regional advertising market was estimated at 45 bln rubles (approximately \$670 mln) (AKAR, 2016).
16. The National Advertising Alliance (NAA) was established in 2016. Its founders include the four biggest Russian media corporations: Perviy Kanal, VGTRK, Gazprom-Media Holding and National Media Group. The NAA's key partner is Region Media, a media company that sells TV, radio and digital advertising in 27 of Russia's largest cities. In addition, the company's authorized partners sell advertising in another 115 Russian cities and towns.
17. Existing data on state and commercial financing is generalized; therefore, I could not access statistics on particular regions or media outlets.
18. For instance, Tatarstan has a strong paternalistic culture, which is reflected in the region's practices of media control and is supported by political elites. On the contrary, the Tomsk region—which boasts a high level of human capital due to its many universities and research institutes—was the last city in Russia with an independent commercial TV channel (i.e. TV2).
19. Federal law No 191, titled 'On the state support of mass media and book publishing in the Russian Federation', was passed in December 1995.
20. Federal law No 177, titled 'On the economic support of district (city) newspapers', was passed in November 1995.
21. Richter (2006) noticed that in 2002, two thirds of the total circulating press in Russia were regional (local) newspapers, half of which were district and city newspapers.
22. Here, clientelism refers to 'a form of social and political organization where access to public resources is controlled by powerful "patrons" and is delivered to less powerful "clients" in exchange for defense and other forms of service' (Hallin & Papathanassopoulos, 2002, pp. 184–5).
23. This lack of clarity was observed among both the managers (i.e. general directors, producers) and the content creators (i.e. editors, journalists). In small local media outlets, the positions of chief editor and general director are generally held by the same person.
24. In the present research, I suggest that stakeholders in the regional media system include regional media professionals (i.e. journalists and managers), regional authorities, regional advertisers and the audience.
25. The short period between 1990–1992 may be seen as an exception.



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